



VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT
OF AGRICULTURE AND
CONSUMER SERVICES



Organic Certification in Virginia

Organic agriculture is one of the fastest growing segments of agriculture in the country. According to the Organic Trade Association, the organic industry is growing at a rate of more than 20 percent annually. Virginia producers are contributing to that growth and many are adopting organic farming methods. If you are interested in making the move to organic, read through this list of questions and answers to find out more.

What do I need to do to sell certified organic products?

Farmers and processors/handlers who want to sell their products as certified organic must complete the organic certification process through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Organic Program (NOP).

Does the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) offer any assistance to farmers and processors/handlers transitioning to organic?

VDACS has an Organic Specialist to assist producers in attaining organic certification and to help organic producers market their products. See the contact information below.

What is the National Organic Program?

In 1990, Congress passed the Organic Foods Production Act (OFPA). The OFPA required the USDA to develop national standards for organically produced agricultural products to assure consumers that products marketed as organic meet consistent, uniform standards. The OFPA and the NOP regulations require that agricultural products labeled as organic originate from farms or handling operations certified by a USDA-accredited certification agency.

What are the National Organic Program regulations?

Production and handling standards address organic crop production, wild crop harvesting, organic livestock management, and the processing and handling of organic agricultural products. Organic crops are raised without using conventional pesticides and herbicides, or petroleum-based, or sewage sludge-based fertilizers. Animals raised on an organic operation must be fed certified organic feed and given access to the outdoors. They are given no antibiotics or growth hormones.

How do I get certified in Virginia?

To get started, choose a certification agency from the list at the NOP site www.ams.usda.gov/nop. Then request an application (see "Can you recommend a certifier?").

How do farmers and processors/handlers become certified?

You will need to submit an application containing the following information to a certification agency:

- The type of operation to be certified (farm or crop, livestock, processing, or a combination thereof);
- A field history of substances applied to the land for the previous three years;
- The organic products being grown, raised, or processed;
- The organic system plan (OSP) — a plan describing practices and substances used in production. The OSP also must describe monitoring practices to be performed to verify that the plan is effectively implemented, a recordkeeping system, and practices to prevent commingling of organic and non-organic products.

Send the application with your farm plan and field history to the certification agency, and wait to receive feedback. After they have what they need, the agency will assign you an inspector who will contact you, set up an inspection time, inspect your operation and write a report with recommendations. The certifier will then review the report and respond with a decision.

Tell me about the recordkeeping.

Recordkeeping systems vary from farm to farm. Some operations use simple, straightforward systems and some opt for more complex approaches. Whatever system is used, the producer simply needs to make sure they keep records sufficient to verify their organic practices. Applicants for certification must keep accurate post-certification records for five (5) years concerning the production, harvesting, and handling of agricultural products that are to be sold as organic.

Can I say I am “organic” or I “grow organically,” or “use organic practices” and not be certified?

The USDA oversees the use of the term “organic” so unless you are certified organic, you may not represent or advertise your product using that word or displaying the USDA organic seal.

What if I have sales of less than \$5,000 per year?

Producers or handling (processing) operations that sell less than \$5,000 a year in organic agricultural products may be exempt from certification. They may label their products organic if they abide by the standards, but they cannot display the USDA organic seal. Although they are not certified, they must maintain all of the same records that a certified entity would have to maintain, and the USDA still retains the right to inspect the operation. There can be up to a \$10,000 fine for violations.

How long will the certification process take?

The certification process takes as little as a couple of months - but possibly more. It depends on the certification company, how fast they get necessary documents from you, how long the inspection takes, etc.

Can an inspector help us with the process?

An inspector/consultant can work for a farmer/producer either on a consultant basis or as an inspector, but not both within a two-year time period (conflict of interest). The inspector is allowed to clarify the meaning and interpretation of the organic standards.

Can you recommend a certifier?

We prefer to recommend the NOP Web site's certification agencies page for the most up-to-date list of certifiers. The information can be found at www.ams.usda.gov/nop. Or you can review the VDACS Organic Resource Guide to see the list of certifiers servicing Virginia as well as organic supplier, processors, and other information. The guide is available at www.virginiagrown.gov.

Are there any financial resources to assist me in transitioning my operation to organic?

VDACS administers a cost-share program for organic certification which reimburses 75 percent of the cost of the organic certification up to \$750. These grants are awarded on a first-come, first-served basis and available for a limited time period. Additional information and application forms for this program are available at www.vdacs.virginia.gov/marketing/organic.shtml.

**For additional information or questions, contact
the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services**

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